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Hildenbrand, William F. "Bill" oral history interview

Don Nicoll

Interview with William F. "Bill" Hildenbrand by Don Nicoll

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee
Hildenbrand, William F. "Bill"

Interviewer
Nicoll, Don

Date
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Place
Upper Marlboro, Maryland

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Use Restrictions

Biographical Note

William Frye "Bill" Hildenbrand was born in Pottstown, Pennsylvania on November 28, 1921. He attended public schools in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, and served in the Army during World War II and the Korean War. A former radio announcer, Hildenbrand went to Washington in 1957 to work for Representative Harry Haskell, and in 1961, Senator Caleb Boggs. In 1969, he became the assistant to Republican Senatorial Whip Hugh Scott, and in 1974 he was elected Republican Secretary of the Senate, retiring in 1984. Mr. Hildenbrand worked with Senator Muskie on the Air and Water Pollution Subcommittee.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: air traffic control in the 1960s; Senator J. Caleb Boggs; air and water pollution subcommittee; Muskie's leadership on the pollution committee; automobile industry's (Detroit) reaction to the committee; Senator Muskie's golf game; difference between governors and senators; crossing party lines for Muskie in 1968; and the disappearance of "statesmen" in politics.

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Transcript

Don Nicoll: It is Saturday afternoon, the 2nd of December, the year 2000. We're in upper Marlboro, Maryland at the home of Bill Hildenbrand, and Don Nicoll is interviewing Mr. Hildenbrand. Bill, could you give us your full name and date and place of birth, and spell your name for us?

William Hildenbrand: Okay, it's William [Frye] Hildenbrand, H-I-L-D-E-N-B-R-A-N-D, and I was born in Pottstown, Pennsylvania [November 28] in 1921.

DN: And Bill, how did you develop an interest in politics?

WH: Well, I don't know that I really developed an interest. I was in the radio business and got to begin to follow a lot of campaigns and conventions, and from that I think I developed an interest in politics. And then I was in Delaware on a radio station when I was asked to come to Washington with a congressman from Delaware to work on an air traffic control problem that he was interested in, and from there I just stayed. As most people say, well I'm just coming to Washington for a couple of months or so, and I was there for almost thirty years.

DN: Had, now you were in radio, were you a reporter?

WH: I was a broadcaster, uh-hunh.

DN: And how had you settled on that career?

WH: Well, when I was in high school and they did the yearbook they said, everybody has to say what they're going to be and I decided I wanted to be a sports reporter. And I got into the

business at AFN, the Armed Forces Network, in Germany after the war. When I got out of the service I stayed over there to work for AFN and then pursued it when I came back into the United States.

DN: Had your folks had any interest in public service or politics?

WH: Neither one of them had any interest in politics.

DN: Did you have siblings?

WH: Did not.

DN: And who was the congressman you went to work for?

WH: Well, first of all I went to work for Harry Haskell from Delaware, and then Senator J. Caleb Boggs when he was elected in 1960.

DN: And you went to work for Representative Haskell as a legislative assistant?

WH: As a legislative assistant, yes.

DN: And what was the air traffic control problem that you were -?

WH: He was concerned with the near misses and he decided that he, that we should, we the government, should do something about them, that the regulatory agencies were not really that concerned about near misses. But he felt that they were, should be concerned because there was more of those than the people really knew that were happening. And he decided that he wanted to call, at least the country's attention, to this particular problem. And so that's what he did.

DN: He was very prescient, considering what's happened over the years.

WH: Yeah, he was a little before his time, because the airlines and some of the people that run airports were not very happy with what he was doing because they, they do not, as you know, call the public's attention to those kind of things. And they didn't want anybody else calling their attention to them.

DN: Tell us a little bit about Senator Boggs.

WH: Well, Senator Boggs had been a congressman in the Truman administration in the late forties, then ran for governor in the early fifties and was governor up until 1960 when he ran for the Senate. In fact he was governor at the same time that Senator Muskie was governor and they had known each other as governors. And then in 1960, why the Republican Party prevailed upon Caleb to run for the Senate against Senator [J. Allen] Frear, a Democrat, and Senator Boggs was elected and came to Washington and stayed here until 1972.

DN: And during the first three years, well '61-'62, did you have any dealings with Senator

Muskie and his office?

WH: Well I had some dealings with him at the time that Senator Boggs went on the Public Works committee and Senator Muskie was already on that committee. And whether it was Jennings Randolph or not, they decided that air and water pollution was a subject that needed some study and so they formed a subcommittee on air and water pollution. And Muskie became the chairman of that committee and Boggs became the ranking member. And so I became interested in the subject and attended a lot of the hearings, and Senator Muskie took quite a number of field hearings both on air and water pollution. And I was fortunate to be able to travel on most of those hearings as the ranking staff member on that subcommittee.

DN: As I recall, you and Ron Linton, the chief clerk of the full committee, and I ended up being for the first couple of years at least the, the staff for the committee.

WH: It was very short on staff, if I remember. That's true, there were not very many staff members.

DN: How did that subcommittee work as you recall it?

WH: Well it worked, I think it worked exceptionally well, the, under the leadership of Senator Muskie, that we knew what the issue was. And the question was: how do we at the government level begin to provide primarily for states to get interested in the subject and also to be in a position to do something about controlling it? And I think the first piece of legislation was a water pollution bill, that created money for grants that went to states, that they could establish pollution control mechanisms within their own states and in their own communities. And we passed that bill, and Jim Quigley, a congressman from Pennsylvania, became head of the water pollution control administration which would have been I guess during the Johnson years. And I recall that the committee was not very happy with the way Quigley was interpreting the law that we had passed, and we felt that there were things that needed to be done that, for I assume political reasons, they weren't so sure they wanted to do. But we had, we had our interaction with Mr. Quigley.

DN: And within the committee were there any major policy differences during those early years?

WH: Not, there were not too many, the, we got into air pollution, there became some differences but the water pollution was fairly quiet and everybody recognized the necessity for doing something. And the method that was used to do it was pretty acceptable by almost everybody.

DN: The, as the committee developed and we got into more controversial areas, how did Senator Boggs and Senator Muskie handle those differences? I don't remember any particular differences between the two of them, but there were other members of the committee who disagreed with some of the efforts.

WH: Yes, Senator, both Senator Boggs and Senator Muskie, having been governors and

having known each other, got along fairly well. But there were others, when we got into the area of beginning to regulate, that's when a lot of the problems began to come up, particularly in the field of air pollution where we were beginning to set emission standards. And the major fights always were whether we should have state standards, or whether we should have national standards for emissions. And I remember Senator Muskie saying, "Well it doesn't make much sense to have a state standard if the air is going to just flow back and forth. You'll have one for Maryland and the air will go into Pennsylvania, and Pennsylvania won't have that same standard and they'll be in violation." And so he advocated that we have national standards so that everybody would know no matter where they went, this was the standard for control of air pollution.

And there were a lot of heated exchanges, particularly with industries. The paper industry for one, and those people that did a lot of air pollution, oil and people like that. But, then the auto industry, we tried desperately to get them to control auto emissions. We visited the plants in Detroit a number of times to see what kind of research they were doing and how they were beginning to handle the problem of pollution and that was about the first time that we began to talk about air emissions in terms of automobiles.

And I recall we took a field trip to Los Angeles and, which had very, very bad smog problems. And I can remember standing up on top of their city hall at 6:30 in the morning and as the people came to work you could see the smog beginning to come in with the same, with all of those automobiles, it just sort of drifted in like a cloud. And so it was obvious that we needed to do something about the automobile emissions. And as it turned out we finally have done, maybe not as much as people would have liked to have done, but we at least got people interested and aware of what kind of pollution they were going to have if they continued to have as many automobiles as we now have without some kind of air pollution controls. And they talked, many times we looked at prototypes of electric automobiles, even in those days, but you had to have a trunk load of batteries in order to operate your electric car, and then you could only go grocery shopping and that would be the end of it. And so that never quite worked.

DN: What was your impression of the auto industry's efforts at dealing with the emissions problem when you went to Detroit?

WH: Well they were of course, as most industries that we dealt with when we were looking at regulation, they almost tried to convince us, "Well there really isn't a problem, you know, it isn't a problem." And they spent a lot of time in trying to hold down the numbers that the committee wanted to put on emissions. They always said, "Well no, we can't meet that standard, it's much too high." And, but the committee continued to say, you know, these standards are needed in order for us to do something about the pollution control. And there was no question, I think, in most of the committee members' minds that if the auto industry put its mind to it, it had the capability and it had the research to go ahead and meet whatever standard this committee decided to set for auto emissions. And as it turned out, they could do that and have in many instances now done it.

DN: You continued with Senator Boggs on his staff through 1973, or '74?

WH: Yes, the end of ‘73 I was elected to secretary of the minority, in January of ‘74.

DN: And so you were involved in the environmental legislation right up through the 1970 act.

WH: Yes, hm-hmm.

DN: Did the nature of the debate change at all during that period?

WH: Not really. The committee had pretty well established that there were air problems and there were water problems in terms of pollutions, pollutants. And the people, as the committee continued to work, as the committee continued to go around the country and hold public hearings, the public and the media became more and more aware of the problem and that we were trying to do something about it. And so, the members also became more active in their realization that there was a problem and it was less parochial than it had been initially. Initially when it first started everybody was taking care of their own interests. But as it proceeded and became much more of an issue nationally, then it became a little easier to begin to establish standards which could be met by states or by industries that were working in this field.

DN: During that time did you work on any other legislation that involved Senator Muskie?

WH: I don’t really think so. We had, we had pretty much devoted our time to the environment and we, as I said, we took an awful lot of field trips. Senator Muskie was beginning to take up golf as an avocation and there were many, many times when we would be at a hearing . . . . I remember one particularly in Denver when the publisher of the *Denver Post* wanted the senator to play golf at Columbine Country Club.

And we only had a day of hearings and so they managed to shut off everybody who wanted to testify, so Senator Muskie and the publisher could get out to the course in order to get in eighteen holes of golf before we caught an airplane that evening for Kansas City. And as it turned out, they had to hold the plane for us. And I remember walking on that plane and there was an awful lot of disgruntled passengers wondering why they were still sitting there waiting for these disheveled people, walking in, to get on the plane going to Kansas City.

DN: Now were you part of the golf -?

WH: I was, yes, I was part of the golf. We played golf almost every chance we could when we went on one of those trips and we had good times.

DN: How was Ed Muskie as a golf partner?

WH: Well, he was, he never became the golfer that he wanted to be, as I think a lot of golfers never do, but he loved the game. And I became a member of Burning Tree [Golf and] Country Club here outside of Washington in 1985, the day that I resigned as secretary. And Ed was a member and so we saw each other occasionally out there from time to time because he did, he did love to play golf.

DN: Now, one of the things I did not ask you before about committee activity was how Senator Muskie dealt with disagreements within the committee. Do you recall what his style and methods were?

WH: Well, Senator Muskie was somewhat like . . . . I think governors for some reason seem to have different ways of dealing with problems than senators today, at least seem to have. There was always consultation. There was always an attempt to work with the members of the committee to find out what their problems were and see if there was some way in which we could compensate and adjust to meet the problems. But Ed Muskie was extremely strong in his beliefs and his opinions, and he would go just so far in trying to accommodate other members. And then at some point he would flat out say, and it was obvious when he reached that point because you could see that he had reached that point, and he would say, "All right, that's it, and this is the way it's going to be." And that's the way it was. But he was well respected by the members because they knew that they would have a fair shake if they had a problem. He would listen to it and attempt to, you know, to work it out if he could.

DN: You referred to the difference between former governors and other senators, and also implied a difference in style these days in the Senate from what you experienced back in the sixties and seventies. You had probably more of an opportunity than most other people to observe the Senate as it's changed from 1960 through the mid-eighties. And is there, are there characteristics that you would cite as being major differences over time?

WH: Well I think so. I've often thought that sometime I'm going to sit down and write a column and the heading is going to be 'Where have all the statesmen gone?' because if you look at the days of the sixties and the seventies you can call the role of senators, there are among those names men who were truly statesmen and who put the interests of the United States above everything else, even above their parties and in some cases above their states.

But today that is not the case, today the interests of members seem to lie either in the philosophy of their party, or their own particular belief of what they think is best for the country, not what the country thinks is best but what they think is best for the country. And so I think that, we wonder why there's so much acrimony and things on the floor these days, and it's because of the one side not wanting to look weak by negotiating with the other side. They just simply want to say, "This is what we're going to do and we've got the votes to do it, and we're going to do it." And it's not good for the country. The best thing that's happened is the election that is just completed. When you have the fifty-fifty vote in the senate, they will have to get along with each other now or they might as well go out of business.

DN: You showed a great interest, a friendly interest as I recall, in the Ed Muskie campaign for vice president in 1968. And you came out at least once, that I recall, to greet us on return from a trip at the airport. Did you find it at all awkward to be consorting sometimes with those Democrats?

WH: No, not really. I knew that my boss' relationship with Ed was so good that he had no problem with anything that I did along those lines. But Muskie and I had developed a good relationship and he would have been a good vice president and I was, you know, more than

happy to support him in any way that I could. That's what we don't have now is the kind of people like an Ed Muskie that we had in, even a Margaret Chase Smith as, you know, still believed very strongly in what's good for the country. And we miss those kind of people. And the country is the worst for it.

DN: As you look back on your Senate career, what are some of the most vivid memories you have of highs and lows?

WH: Well, the lows of course would be the assassination of President Kennedy in '63. As I stop and think about it, I've been, the period of time when one president was assassinated, a presidential candidate was assassinated, a vice president resigned, a president resigned, and all of those had to be low points of, particularly since the vice president and the president were of my party, and that, that. But the high points, I think, was my service as secretary of the Senate and my association with Howard Baker of Tennessee who became majority leader in the Reagan years and his fight for the Panama Canal and turning it over to the Panamanians even though his party was very, very much against that. He took that statesman-like position that four presidents before Reagan had taken, that we should turn the canal over to them. And so those, I remember those kind of things.

But the days of, fortunately the days that we had because of the relationship between the members themselves, they were good days. You did not have the bad days that they must have there now. There was, there's not the civility now that there was then. Now you can't even be a friend with a Democrat if you're a Republican. In those days, you know, some of our best friends were of the opposite party and we got things done a lot of times staff to staff, much more so than member to member because the staffs could talk to each other and they understood their member. I know I worked a lot with Ted Kennedy's staff, and I knew my boss and they knew theirs. But we could sit down and we could negotiate things that I don't think happens now at all.

DN: Is there anything else, Bill, that you would like to add in terms of Senator Muskie?

WH: There's one very, very small story. We were in hearings in New Orleans on water pollution of the Mississippi River. And during the hearing, down the hall, down the aisle, came this little old lady in a pinafore dress and a big hat that they would wear in the old southern days, and she wanted to be heard. And of course Senator Muskie was always the gentleman and he said, "Of course we'd like to hear if you have a solution to the problem." And she said, "I absolutely do," she said, "All you have to do is build a big fence all along the Mississippi so nobody can throw anything into the Mississippi." And at that point we discharged the witness. But we had some good times in those days.

DN: Thank you very much, Bill.

WH: My pleasure.

End of Interview